

Walking with Jesus
Luke 24:13-35
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This is an awesome story. It's what we ministers call "meaty," because there's so much in here to talk about. I could preach for hours on the Road to Emmaus story, although I'm not planning on it.

This is the most fully developed resurrection appearance in the Gospels, and it has a little bit of everything. In fact, when you think about it, it's a microcosm of what being a Christian is all about. The crisis that leads to disappointment, doubt, and a deeper search for faith; the turning to someone who might or might not help; the discovery that in God's word there are answers to the questions that have arisen; the sudden realization of Jesus' presence with us, walking beside us, warming our hearts, breaking bread with us. This story captures the essence of the Christian journey.

But the tendency with a story like this is to want to skip ahead to the ending. I was having a conversation once with a family from church, and the wife was telling a rather long-winded, meandering story that I'm sure had a point somewhere at the distant end of it. I could tell the husband was getting impatient, and finally he blurted out, "C'mon, Honey, we don't want to hear about the labor, just show us the baby!"

When it comes to the Road to Emmaus story, I think we are eager to get to the baby without going through the labor. We want to read the end of novel without working our way through the story, unraveling the plot, learning the characters. This story has two parallels to worship: the reading and explaining of scripture, and then the breaking of bread. I think our tendency is to want to skip the sermon and get right to communion. No suck luck today, folks.

I think that impatience which I know I have as a Christian is a real detriment. As Tim talked about last week, to truly understand the nature of being a Christian, we have to be willing to face and reflect on some of the less appealing aspects of our faith, like suffering or obedience. Or in the case of these travelers, disappointment.

It's Easter Sunday, and Cleopas and the other unnamed person are traveling back to Emmaus from Jerusalem, where some amazing and perplexing things have happened. So here's my question: If there's talk of a missing body and appearing angels and a risen Savior in Jerusalem, why are they leaving? If I were them, I would want to stick around, to find out what's going on. Why are they heading out of town when all the answers are behind them?

Because what's behind them represents the destruction of their dreams. Barbara Brown Taylor says that "hope in the past tense is one of the saddest sounds a human being can make." Cleopas says, "We had hoped that he was the One who was going to redeem Israel." We had hoped. We had hoped for a optimistic diagnosis. We had hoped for financial security. We had hoped to spend the rest of our lives together. There is nothing that rips your heart out like hope in the past tense. And where does that leave us? Not wanting to stick around, that's for sure. We want to run away.

You and I have walked this road to Emmaus before. It's the road of deep disappointment. It's the road of realization that your plans may not be God's plans, that life sometimes stomps on and smashes our biggest hopes. If Jesus had truly been the one

to redeem Israel, he should have been defeating pagans, not dying at their hands. We had hoped.

I hope you see the irony at play here. The travelers are walking along, chins dragging, looking like they had lost their best friend, when this stranger comes along and asks them, “Why the long faces?” And they begin to explain to him all that had happened and how their dreams had been dashed and how this prophet Jesus had disappointed them by having the audacity to let himself get killed. And of course, we readers know to whom they are talking. Cleopas literally says, “No one has seen Jesus,” and he says it to Jesus!

I think I’ve told you before about the time I was in the drugstore to pick up a prescription, and the pharmacist said to me, “This prescription is for Kory?” and I said, “Yes.” And she said, “Can you verify the address?” And I said, “563 N. Emerson Lane in Hainesville.” And she said, “Has she ever used this medication before?” And I wanted to say, “Lady, I’m her! I’m standing right in front of you, how can you not know me?” Jesus says to them, “How foolish you are!” and proceeds to show them through the Scriptures exactly what’s been going on and who it is that’s standing right in front of them.

How often have we walked lonely roads and gone through difficult times thinking we are all alone, only to find out that Jesus was walking beside us and we didn’t even know it. It’s an important lesson, because my experience has always been that when I am in the midst of difficult times, I am consumed by negative thoughts. I think that’s human nature. It’s hard to feel upbeat and chipper when we’ve suffered a hope-killing blow.

I wonder how many times I’ve asked God to be with me, to give me some kind of sign, and all the while God has been standing right in front of me going, “I’m right here! How can you not know me?” It gives me hope to know that God won’t stop walking beside me just because I don’t acknowledge his presence.

After the travelers pour out their hearts, Jesus responds rather unsympathetically, “You idiots! If you’d read your Bible, you wouldn’t be surprised.” And he proceeds to interpret the biblical story for them in light of his resurrection. Because that is how the story must be heard. That is how all stories of faith must be heard. The Creation Story, Noah’s Ark, Joseph and his fancy coat, Moses and the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the prophets’ warnings and predictions...all these stories, all the stories in the Bible, only make sense when read in light of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, in light of God’s plan for us.

I love movies that have surprise endings. I’m terrible at figuring them out, which may be why I enjoy them so much. I especially liked “The Usual Suspects,” because the twist at the end is so well done and so surprising (at least to me!). When I found out the identity of Keyser Soze, I started yelling at the movie screen, “No way!” I had to watch the movie again to fully appreciate it and to better understand what was going on.

When we’re in the middle of the movie of our lives, things don’t always make sense to us. We don’t quite understand why things happen the way they do. We get caught up in the tensions of what feel like irresolvable conflicts. But what this story tells us is that if we strive to look at our lives through the lens of Christ’s death and resurrection, we’ll gain a different perspective on our story.

That perspective, which the travelers lacked, was the perspective of hope. What this story reminds me is that I believe in a God who has this amazing knack of taking dead dreams and resurrecting them in surprising ways. For the two travelers and for us, what may on the surface look like the end of hope may actually be the beginning. God’s

promises are trustworthy. God is good, God is with us, God will redeem us, although maybe not in the ways we plan or expect.

That is the source of our hope, along with the reassurance of scripture and God's abiding presence with us. This story gives me optimism, because it tells me a little something about the people who experience Jesus' presence. He didn't come to those who had it all figured out. He didn't walk with people who were able to keep a smile on their face while their world was coming to an end. Instead, he comes to those who are disappointed, doubtful, disconsolate. He comes to those who don't know their Bibles, who don't recognize him even when he's walking right beside them. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home. He comes to people like us.

Thankfully, the travelers invite Jesus to stay with them, and they are given a transformed view of this stranger in their midst. Yes, now we come to baby, to the end of today's journey, to the shared meal and broken bread. We come to be reminded that Christ is with us along our journeys. We come to have our eyes opened to his presence and his teaching. If we are prepared, if our hearts are ready, we will see him.

But here's the thing: When we leave this place, we'll start another journey, and I'd be willing to bet that somewhere along this coming week's journey, we'll run into disappointment, or doubt, or despair. Will we continue to live in the past tense? "We had hoped." Or will we remember what we've heard in scripture, the promise of protection and presence: "I am with you always"? May we recognize – in the hug from a friend or loved one, in the words of scripture or a devotional, in the kind gesture of a stranger – that Jesus walks with us on our journey.